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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed for student advisors in the United States who are counseling students preparing for a period of study in a fully integrated higher education program in the Federal Republic of Germany. Topics covered include: (1) an overview of the higher educational system in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG); (2) organization of FRG university studies; (3) university campus life; (4) language test and registration; (5) types of classes; and (6) studying at a German university, university professors, and the administration. Major differences between American and German systems of higher education identified include: the requirement that the student be more independent in the German system; less emphasis on individual courses and more emphasis on examinations in the middle and at the end of the course of studies; and less contact between students and professors. A bibliography of recommended books is provided. (LPT)

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NAFSA Field Service

Working Paper #15

Studying in the German University:

A Guide for U.S. Advisers and Students

This working paper provides basic information on the German Educational System and is designed for U.S. study abroad advisers counseling students who are interested in studying in a fully integrated German higher education program.

The paper was prepared by Axel Markert, Director, Office of International Relations, University of Tübingen, Germany.

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STUDYING IN THE GERMAN UNIVERSITY:
A Guide for U.S. Advisers and Students

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Introduction

This basic information is designed for study abroad advisers in the United States who are counseling students preparing for a period of study in the Federal Republic of Germany. It is written primarily for the student who plans to study in a fully integrated program, and does not claim to be a comprehensive treatise on the German educational system. Those who are interested in more detailed information should consult the World Education Series volume on the Federal Republic of Germany by Georgeanne B. Porter. The present document grew out of the need expressed by students and advisers for more background and basic information from the U.S. study abroad perspective regarding academic matters. It therefore tries to answer the most common concerns of U.S. students.

The Higher Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany

As in the United States, the federal structure of the Federal Republic of Germany has a strong influence on the organization of the educational system. Unlike the U.S. system, the German system is primarily characterized by public support. There are only few instances of private higher education. Nearly all of the German universities are supported by the federal states, the 10 Länder [1] and West Berlin.

There are four major types of tertiary institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany:

1. Universitäten (universities), including the Technische Universitäten or Technische Hochschulen (technical universities), and a number of other institutions of equal rank such as Medizinische Hochschulen (medical universities), Theologische or Kirchliche Hochschulen (theological colleges), Pädagogische or Erziehungswissenschaftliche Hochschulen (teacher-training colleges)

2. Kunsthochschulen and Musikhochschulen (colleges of art and music)

3. Fachhochschulen (technical training colleges)

4. Gasamthochschulen (comprehensive universities)

The major pillar of the German higher educational system remain the university institutions, and it is those institutions which generally attract most U.S. students. Normally, a complete range of subject matter is offered: economics, humanities, law, medicine, natural sciences, social sciences, and (at the technical institutions) engineering.

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1. Bayern, Baden-Württemberg, Bremen

The Kunst- and Musikhochschulen offer training in artistic and musical subjects.

The Fachhochschulen are oriented to more practice-related training, providing students with scientific or artistic skills needed for specific professions. Their degree courses, which are generally shorter than those of universities, lead to a Diplom and, often, directly to employment.

In some of the Länder, comprehensive universities were established. These institutions regroup existing higher education facilities of all types under one roof. It thus is easier for students to transfer between those types of institutions.

About 1.4 million students are enrolled at about 220 institutions of higher education. About 1.1 million study at university institutions (categories 1 and 4 above), 20,000 at Music and Art Colleges and about 300,000 at Fachhochschulen. About 75,000 students ate foreign nationals, which amounts to an average population of 5.6 percent.

There are about 70 universities, of which the five largest have about one fourth of the total enrollment (Munich, Berlin, Cologne, Munster and Hamburg--all have over 40,000 students!). More than half of the universities have over 10,000 students. There is a total of about 30 music and art colleges and 100 Fachhochschulen.

Organization of FRG University Studies

Since most U.S. students spending their year abroad in the FRG tend to be enrolled in universities, the information provided in the following sections focuses on that sector.

In most academic subjects, the course of study is divided into two major stages--the Grundstudium (basic or stage I studies) and the Hauptstudium (main or stage II studies). Sometimes intermediate examinations are required to pass from one stage to the next. These have different names according to the subject (Zwischenprüfung, Vordiplom) and do not provide anything which would have the function of a U.S. degree. In general, these examinations are required after about four semesters; the student then has a minimum total of 15 years of schooling, bringing him or her close to the total required for a B.A. degree (12 plus 4). Therefore, a student in the Hauptstudium is similar in academic level to a U.S. graduate student.

A final degree is usually earned by a combination of "credit" accumulation, a thesis and written as well as oral exams, the credits being less and the examinations more important than in the U.S. context. Examinations can either be university exams (Diplomexamen, Magister Artium) providing academic degrees

(Diplom, M.A.) or state exams producing a state-recognized "degree" which qualifies German nationals for employment in civil service positions (secondary school teachers, lawyers, doctors, etc.).

Although the total length of a M.A. course of study is, in theory, very close to a degree course in the United States (four to five years beyond secondary education), German students tend to take quite a bit longer in attaining their final degree, even if they remain enrolled in what would be considered a full-time degree program in the U.S. context. This has to do with a high level of academic freedom in terms of the organization of the students' individual schedules within the different stages. German students do not belong to "classes" in a university setting and therefore generally pay less attention to the academic progress of others in their given age group.

The academic year is divided into two semesters, the "winter" semester (October to March) and the "summer" semester (April to September). Course activities, however, generally take place between mid-October and mid-February ("Wintersemester") and mid-April and mid-July ("Sommersemester"). Courses are, as a rule, organized on a semester rather than on an annual basis. The spring break, mid-February to mid-April, is often used to hold examinations between terms, and students are expected to use it for independent study and course preparation for the following term.

Types of Classes

There are three basic types of classes:

1. Lectures (Vorlesungen)
2. Seminars (Proseminare, Hauptseminare)
3. Exercise Classes, Labs (Übungen, Praktika)

The lecture is the most characteristic difference between the German and U.S. course systems, and, in general, is responsible for most credit transfer problems which occur in the German-American context. Typically, a professor giving a lecture course at a German university will hold a monologue on a given subject while the students only listen and take notes. Usually attendance is not taken, and it is not uncommon that a major lecture course which at the beginning of, say, a Sommersemester, is attended by 500 students will only have 50 by the end of that term. As a rule, there is no dialogue between teacher and students, and, if at all, students will ask questions at the end of a lecture. Of course, following the lectures attentively is, at least in theory, not all which is expected from the students. Ideally, they are expected to do a considerable amount of reading on the topic covered in the course, and the professor usually provides students with a recommended reading list at the beginning of the term. There are, as a rule, no papers required, and no oral or written exams at the end of the course.

The seminar (Proseminar in phase I studies, Hauptseminar in phase II) comes very close to what, at U.S. institutions, is considered a "course." Unlike the lecture courses, students need special permission to attend a seminar, usually by registering for it at the end of the previous or the beginning of the current term. In a seminar, there is in-depth coverage of a special, limited subject, in order to convey skills and knowledge in relation to this subject. There is continuous interaction between the teacher and students, and successful attendance requires one or several papers (which can be prepared and submitted either during the term, or after), or a written exam, an oral exam or a combination of written and oral exams. Upon completion, the student receives directly from the professor a course certificate (Schein), which is usually, but not always, graded.

Ubungen are similar to seminars in that they have limited attendance, examinations (usually written) and tests are required and a Schein (usually graded) is issued. They are more oriented to practical skills (e.g: Ubersetzungsübung--translation course) than to in-depth treatment of a topic. Lab courses, in general, tend to be what they are in science and engineering courses in the United States.

Note: Duplicates of the Scheine are not kept by the university, and course transcripts as known in the United States do not exist at a German university.

University Life

Traditionally, the notion of a "campus" did not exist at German universities. The institutions grew with and within the towns they were located in, and provisions for student housing were not part of the German tradition. Although more recently founded institutions are in fact "campus" universities, where classroom and administration buildings were built with student dormitories in the same or similar architectural style, the "typical" German university is dispersed throughout the town, its building styles often spanning many centuries.

Historically, the German university student was a "scholar"--a grown-up, mature person who had set goals and did not require extensive academic and social service. This, of course, has changed quite a bit since the early '50s; the German student now bears a much closer resemblance to his or her U.S. counterpart. However, the tradition still helps to explain some of the differences between academic life in the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States.

Students (partially because of compulsory military service) tend, on the average, to be a few years older when they start at a German university. They enroll in a course of study which is often single-subject right from the start, and usually have a

definite idea of the profession to which it will lead. There is no "class spirit," usually no emotional attachment to the institution, no pride in the "alma mater" whatsoever and hardly any organized student life. Student activities still tend to be much more centered around "serious" (such as political) issues. Fraternities are of practically no importance; sororities are few. Dormitory accommodations tend to be single-occupancy rooms, and doors have a tendency to remain closed. Social life is sought more outside the university proper--in the restaurants, cafés, pubs and discos of the town, or in a friend's house.

For all these reasons, it is often very difficult, especially for the U.S. undergraduate who is used to being pampered by his college "in loco parentis," to feel at home at a German university. Personal contacts with other than fellow U.S. or foreign students seem to be hard to achieve, and the typical German student usually displays what the U.S. students understand to be anti-Americanism--this strange mixture, also found with French students, of love for U.S. music and icons, and harsh criticism of the U.S. political and social system. This often leads to an overly defensive attitude on the part of U.S. students who find themselves praising exactly those facets of their society which they loathe at home. By and large, European students are comparatively well informed about things American which, in turn, tends to make the U.S. students aggressive in discussions with Europeans, especially if they feel somewhat insecure about the topic themselves. It is therefore of utmost importance that U.S. students, as part of their orientation for the study abroad period, recapitulate what they know about their own country before their departure.

Language Test and Registration

All German universities require a language test from students who came from non-German speaking countries and have not gone through the secondary education system in the FRG. By taking this test, which goes by the name of Prüfung zum Nachweis deutscher Sprachkentnisse, or PNdS for short, the student must prove that he or she has a sufficiently good command of spoken and written German. Usually with the admission letter which tells them they are admitted (Zulassungsbescheid), students receive a statement that they must pass this PNdS before they can be enrolled. The test is administered by the universities during the week directly preceding the semester as a rule. It is not a multiple-choice kind of test, but one in which students must write a summary of a text which has been read to them. Depending on the outcome of the written section, there may also be an oral exam which usually takes place a few days later. The PNdS is by no means a formality; therefore, students are well advised to prepare for it carefully. It may be a good idea to ask the host institution for a sample test. Students do not receive a score, but a grade, and it is possible to fail. For

those U.S. students who do fail, it may very well be the first exam they have failed in their lives.

After having passed this test, students are registered (eingeschrieben) by the university administration. Registration is not for individual courses, but confers student status. Signing up for seminars, practical courses and exercise classes is a separate process which takes place in individual departments. Although the student is expected to list courses he or she intends to take upon the Einschreibung, this is neither controlled nor forwarded to the departments by the administration. At Immatrikulation (matriculation), a Studienbuch (course registration book) is issued to the student in which courses for every semester are recorded, usually on a course registration sheet (Belegbogen). As there is, however, no control of attendance or record of success by the administration, the Studienbuch is of limited value to the U.S. student and the home university. What really counts are the Scheine--the course certificates issued individually at the end of each course (except, as has been explained, for the Vorlesungen), and it is advisable for the student to get two copies of those in case one is lost. Together with the Studienbuch, the student also receives a Studiennachweis (student I.D. card) which is needed when dealing with administrative authorities inside and outside of the university. Among other things, it entitles its holder to eat in the subsidized student restaurants (Mensen), and to price reductions on public transportation, theater tickets, etc.

Matriculation, as a rule, is valid for one semester and has to be renewed for the following term. This process is called Rückmeldung and usually takes place at the end of a given term for the next one. Before either Einschreibung or Rückmeldung, students must have paid their student welfare contributions (Sozialgebühren, including a student activities fee) and submit proof of sufficient health insurance coverage. Students who wish to leave the university have to complete Exmatrikulation--they "ex-matriculate." This act is recorded in their Studienbuch, and the process is taken very seriously by German university administrations. Students are therefore advised to take care of this task before they leave; afterwards, it becomes more difficult and costly. Students who wish to transfer to another university in FRG can only register at the other institution if there is a record of Exmatrikulation in the course registration book.

Studying at a German University

As has been mentioned before, German students, like their French counterparts, concentrate their studies in a select discipline from the outset. All that in the U.S. context would be called "general education requirements" has presumably been covered in the Gymnasium, the German college-preparatory high school. Even

fields which in the United States would be taught in a professional school, like law, are begun in the very first semester in the German system.

Whereas U.S. students tend to organize their academic activities more on a course-by-course basis, German students always study with an eye on the final exam and, typically, are not as concerned about the outcome of an individual course. Therefore, grades and credits are, as a rule, less important. The U.S. exchange student, however, cannot allow the luxury of forgetting about grades and credits during a year in the FRG. Drawing maximum profit from the academic experience often means for him or her earning the same amount of credit in Germany as he or she would have at home in the same period of time. Students should therefore become acquainted with credit transfer rules and requirements before they depart from their home institution if they want the full amount of recognition for what they plan to study at the German university. In general, German universities publish course lists (Vorlesungsverzeichnisse) for every semester. However, these often do not come out before the end of the previous semester. This normally means that by the time they are received by the U.S. institution, it is too late for the adviser to make recommendations before the student's departure. Besides, of course, it would be difficult to judge anyway which of the courses offered would be appropriate and accessible to the student. Flexibility is therefore of utmost importance for the adviser and the student. A rough program could be put together on the basis of an older course catalogue, but several alternatives should also be considered. Since course content is different from university to university, it is most unlikely that the student will be able to duplicate what he or she would have done at the home institution. This, ideally, requires permanent feedback with the department or the adviser at home, and a high level of consciousness on the latter's part as to the mental disposition of a student who is thousands of miles away from home and worried about academic success.

Those U.S. students who wish to concentrate on German language and civilization during their period abroad should be aware that in German departments, they will compete with native speakers who have, obviously, a high linguistic competence and are comparatively sophisticated in the literature. Sometimes the U.S. students are better off taking courses in German for foreigners (Deutsch als Fremdsprache) which are taught at most German universities, often in a semi-academic setting. This means that they are, like EFL units in the United States, often not part of an academic language department, but attached to the university. They usually offer courses which are excellently suited to the needs of U.S. students.

The German academic calendar has a spring break which is eight weeks long (mid-February to mid-April) and during which no

course with the exception of lab courses and excursions) are given. This interregnum between semesters can sometimes be disruptive for students from the United States, who, after a tough winter term, have just started to come to grips with the German "system" and who now, for two months, have no formal "contact hours." It is advisable that this period be used for independent study credits, the content and extent of which should be determined by the department prior to departure. This way, compensation may be achieved for required courses for which there is no equivalent at the German institutions and, the students can be encouraged to gain a better insight into German lives and culture through creative projects (e.g., "The Role of the Local Press", "German Movies in the '80s, etc.). These independent study projects should be evaluated by the home department, based on a written report, possibly in English, and returned by the student.

A similar form of credit is advised for the Vorlesungen or lectures described above (see **Types of Classes**). Since there is no regular form of course evaluation for those, it is usually difficult for U.S. students to obtain credit for attending lectures. Sometimes German lecturers can arrange a short, usually oral, test at the end of the term for U.S. students, as a group or individually. These tests, however, produce results which are often not suited for transfer into the U.S. system. Some professors, understandably, shy away from the additional work involved and give pro-forma tests without really knowing or trying to ascertain whether the students have attended; others are overly conscientious and give regular exams which tend to leave the U.S. student in a state of shock. On the other hand, the Vorlesung is the most common course form and an integral part of the German university's offerings and should, as an academic experience, not be missed by the U.S. student. Evaluation here, too, could be based on a written report on the course content which could be sent to the home department.

Lectures are open to all students, not just to those of a given department, and they are in principle also open to the general public, in accordance with German university tradition. It is therefore not uncommon to have more than 100, or, with popular professors, even 1,000, students in attendance. For those students with a deeper interest in the topic, sometimes special parallel study groups are established in which, under the guidance of assistant professors or advanced students, the subject matter can be discussed and questions clarified. In these study groups, there is usually a test at the end which can provide U.S. students with the evaluation they need for credit transfer. Combinations of this kind can be found under Vorlesung mit Ubung or Vorlesung mit Tutorium in the university catalog or departmental course listings.

The Vorlesung example shows that concepts like "contact hours"

and "full-time load" do not necessarily make sense in the German context. A lecture with tutorial can provide up to six contact hours--four for the Vorlesung, two for the Ubung. This, obviously, will not in all cases translate into six credits at the U.S. institution. The "load", therefore, depends on the kinds of courses the student is enrolled in, and for the U.S. undergraduate, two Proseminare and two Ubungen may mean a sizable load, although they may not add up to more than eight "contact hours". Until 20 years ago, a German student had to be enrolled in at least four hours of courses (including lectures!) to qualify as an ordentlicher Student, or literally, "orderly" (meaning full-time) student. In general, two to three Seminare (i.e. four to six hours), two to three exercise classes, practical courses, tutorials (again four to six hours) and a couple of lectures (for a total of 15 class hours) would constitute a reasonable "full-time load" in the U.S. sense of the term. Overloads, obviously, can be counterproductive. Dropping and adding classes, on the other hand, is less of a problem in the FRG, since registration is not for individual courses, administratively speaking.

Grades present another major problem to the U.S. student since grading has virtually no importance with regard to individual courses at German universities. This is different with final examinations where nowadays grades can swing the balance between a job and unemployment. Course grades, however, only serve to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, and to show that a course has been passed. Often there is no grade; this then translates into a "pass" on the U.S. transcript. The German Schein, in that case, should state that the student has teilgenommen, i.e. participated in the course; successful participation is sometimes described by erfolgreich teilgenommen. Translating grades from one system into another is difficult venture at any time, given the subjectivity of grading within one given system.

The following are approximate U.S.-German grade equivalencies:

German Grade		U.S. Grade Equivalents for Graduates/Undergraduates	
1	"sehr gut"	A	A+
1-		A	A
2+		A-	A
2	"gut"	B+	A-
2-		B	B+
3+		B	B
3	"befriedigend"	B-	B
3-		B-	B-
4+			C+
4	"ausreichend"		C
4-			C-
5	"mangelhaft"		
6	"ungenugend"		

Anything under 4.5 constitutes a failing grade in the German system. There are those U.S. colleagues who would consider this conversion table extraordinarily generous; many students find the contrary. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

The Professors and the Administration

Historically, the backbone of the German university was the chair (der Lehrstuhl) and some claim it still is. This makes the chairholder, or Lehrstuhlinhaber, a very important person, although this position has lost some of its aura of all-pervading power. Women holding chairs at German universities are still a minority. Nowadays, full professors go by the term C4-Professor which describes the rank and salary level as compared to C3- or C2- professors and the like. The German professor, traditionally, has two main tasks--teaching and research--and the Freiheit von Forschung un Lehre is a cherished freedom for the German professor. The notion of "service" is, if not foreign, at least uncommon in the description of a German professor's tasks. All this means that U.S. students will find German university teachers in general, and full professors in particular, less accessible than what they are used to at their home institutions. Therefore, it is best to take the German word for "office hours" (note the plural), Sprechstunde (which is singular), literally--some professor's office doors are indeed only open for one hour per week when the professor is in town. U.S. students should be aware of this and not expect too much personal and academic guidance from this source. There are exceptions to this rule and they tend to be overworked.

Another institution which tends to be overworked is the Akademisches Auslandsamt, the International Office, which exists at nearly every German university and often has a tradition of 60 years or more. These offices provide foreign student services, and administer admission and registration procedures for foreigners and often study abroad advising and overseas programs. As a rule, U.S. students will find the Auslandsämter more easily accessible than professors, but, generally speaking, not as open as they would like. This has to do with a different notion of service also in the administration, with the fact that doors remain closed here, too, and that there is another idea of what Americans call "courtesy." American students usually learn to cope with the German version of courtesy before long. They discover that there are Sprechstunden (plural!) in the Auslandsamt and that the advisers (Betreuer) and exchange coordinators there often know exactly the problems of a junior from a Midwestern college during his or her first few weeks. The administrative structure is very similar to that found in the United States.

Conclusion

To sum up, U.S. students will find the following major differences between the U.S. and FRG systems of higher education:

1. The German system requires the student to be more independent; there is less continuous assessment.

2. Academic success is primarily measured by examinations in the middle and at the end of the program of studies; less "credit" is earned by successful completion of individual courses.

3. Courses more often focus on narrow subject areas from the outset of the program of studies; general education is considered complete by the end of the secondary school level.

4. Teachers are generally less accessible than those in the United States; there is generally less contact between students and professors.

5. Social life on campus and in the dormitories is organized differently; there are generally fewer arranged social activities.

6. German students tend to be older than their U.S. counterparts. The average age at graduation is over 27.

As noted in the last section, German universities are more similar than different from U.S. colleges. When a German adviser was asked what he found especially remarkable during his Fulbright program in the United States, he said, "Bildung ist Ware," or "Education is a merchandise in the United States!" There is some truth to that, especially as seen through German eyes, and much of what is different comes from this perception. U.S. students know how much education is worth since, as a rule, they have to pay for it, and pay dearly. Germans, by and large, have forgotten that free education only means that it is free of charge, and not that it is for nothing. It can be exciting, and the often relaxed atmosphere can be quite attractive to the U.S. student as a year-long escape from his or her academic treadmill. Once the U.S. student has learned to cope with the unwonted freedom inherent in the German system and can communicate in the local dialect, the period abroad will be a success.

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April 1990

Bibliography

Apart from Georganne B. Porter's excellent study on the 'Federal Republic of Germany' in AACRAO'S World Education Series (1986), there are a few short English language publications published by the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) on studies in Germany:

-- "Academic Studies in the Federal Republic of Germany: Information on Academic Studies at Universities in the Federal Republic of Germany and Berlin (West) for Foreign and Stateless Students."

This 40-page brochure gives a very good, short introduction to the different institutions of higher education, the organization of academic studies and questions related to admission. There is also a list of useful addresses and a comprehensive overview of degree courses at German universities.

- "Studies at Universities" is about 100 pages long, has excellent sections on studies, course offerings and student life plus a useful glossary at the end.

Both publications can be obtained free of charge from the German Academic Exchange Service at 950 Third Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10022.

Also recommended is Ulrich Littman's classic "Introduction to the Confusion of German Education," the third revised edition of which was last published by the DAAD in 1977. Although some of the information is now outdated, it still provides one of the best, short English-language descriptions of the educational system.